Bell Is Under Pressure To 'Go Easy' on Helms

10/18/77 By Jack Nelson
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When another VIP tugs at attorney General Griffin B. Bell's sleeve at a Washington cocktail party these days, chances are it is more than just a friendly greeting.

Frequently it is an appeal to "go easy" on Richard Helms, the former Central Intelligence Agency director who faces possible indictment on a perjury charge for lying to a Senate subcommittee.

The appeals come from journalists as well as politicians, from Democrats as well as Republicans, and from such political heavyweights as Averell Harriman, former New York governor and top federal official in Democratic administrations, and former Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller, another former New York governor and a leading Republican for decades.

But Bell, in a lengthy interview, said the almost constant pressure applied by members of the Washington establishment in behalf of Helms will not deter him from "doing my best to vindicate the rule of law."

He said the Helms case is complicated because of the foreign affairs and national security implications, however, and has been difficult to resolve.

Bell hopes to resolve the question of prosecution in that matter and in two other sensitive cases—FBI burglaries and South Korean government influence-peddling among members of Congress—before U.S. District Court Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. becomes FBI director early next year.

As establishment types are pressing Bell on the Helms matter, ordinary citizens are flooding him with mail in an attempt to persuade him to lay off the FBI.

"You wouldn't believe the reservoir of goodwill among the American ublic for the FBI," said Bell. "I get letters from all over, and they don't want FBI agents prosecuted."

Bell receives many letters from friends who are contemporaries and who served with the FBI during World War II, when some FBI break-ins were justified officially on grounds of national security. "But it was a lot different then," said Bell. "People just don't want to take that into account. Most of them just want to leave the FBI alonenow."

As for the Korean scandal, Bell said, there has been little pressure. "Everyone just wants us to get that one over with," he said. "Even the President. They say, 'For God's sakes, finish it.' "

Bell pointed out that he inherited all three of the sensitive cases from the Ford administration and said the investigations did not seem to be going anywhere fast when he took over the Justice Department.

As he accelerated the investigations, the pressure in the Helms and FBI cases increased.

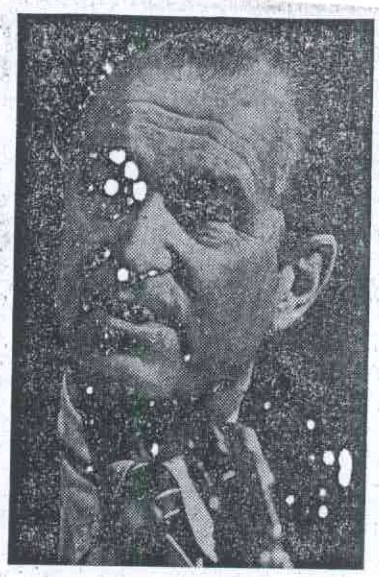
Veteran senators and other political figures who support Helms began to tell Bell that he did not "understand the system."

"They would say, 'You can't indict a man who has had 35 years of public service, ' " Bell said.

At a recent party, CBS commentator Eric Sevareid told him, "It would be a shame if Helms is indicted." Bell replied: "I can't talk about that."

Some prominent Washington figures; have been more public in their support of Helms. Hugh Sidey, Washington bureau chief of Time Magazine, has passionately defended Helms on television and in speeches.

William E. Simon, who served as Treasury Secretary in the Nixon and Ford administrations, recently stated that a legal defense fund established for FBI agents who might be indicted also would provide money for Helms' legal defense if he were indicted.



RICHARD HELMS
. . . numerous VIP supporters

Bell, speaking at a Griffin Bell Day ceremony in his hometown of Americus, Ga., the other day, said the predicament he finds himself in concerning the sensitive cases he inherited reminded him of a story he had told President Carter, a story the President later related during a televised press conference.

"It involved a man who was charged with being drunk and setting a bed on fire," Bell said. "When the judge asked him to enter his plea, he said, "I plead guilty to being drunk, but the bed was on fire when I got into it."

Bell also joked about the many stories involving the cases that have been leaked to the news media. He told of a recent Cabinet meeting at which he jokingly commented to Carter that he had nothing to report because most of what he knew was secret. The attorney General quoted the President as retorting:

"Yeah, I read about your secrets every morning in the newspaper — the KCIA, the Helms case and the FBI cases."